

Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others (review)



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(Review)

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Gregory B. Lee. *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others*. Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. xvii, 278 pp. Hardcover $45.00, ISBN 0–8223–1659–5. Paperback $17.95, ISBN 0–8223–1671–4.

This book strikes a rather different note from a host of others that deal with such heavily marked and loaded terms as nationalism, hybridity, and Other that have become academic shibboleths of sorts that students of literature must pronounce in order to cross the line and join the crowd under the general rubric of Cultural Studies. What I am saying is that not only is Gregory Lee knowledgeable about Cultural Studies and the various critical theories underlying that enterprise (and he reads French as well as English and Chinese), but he often has a sense of what is going on and where he stands vis-à-vis the various issues and theories discussed in this book. In my view, at least, that is by no means an easy accomplishment. Right at the outset, then, this book has my recommendation as an informative and original contribution to the study of the cultural scene in contemporary China, a study that often relates the situation in China to other and comparable scenes in different cultures and places—for example, the United States, Britain, and particularly France.

Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers is a collection of essays on different forms of what Lee calls "cultural productions," chief among which is poetry or the lyric, including the lyrics of songs in popular music. The author has a rather strong and serious, if not idealistic, belief in the efficacy of poetry in the contemporary world. With Benjamin Péret, he asserts that poetry is

> determined by a commitment to a complex human emancipation and an overturning of the alienation of modernity. This is a positive poetic function surpassing the capacity to critique. It refers to active contribution to the construction of "absolute and active freedom," a thoroughgoing "liberation of humanity," not an illusory "liberation" offered by a nationalist credo. (p. 62)

Doesn't this sound a bit excessive for celebrating the force of poetry as an agent for "freedom" and "liberation"? Especially in the context of the rampant commercialism and market consumerism of the 1990s, this sounds rather idealistic, as it seems quite difficult at the moment to imagine poetry in China that still has some resemblance to the kind of liberating force Lee envisions here. But of course in an earlier period in China, much of modern (or modernist) poetry does contribute to the construction of freedom or liberation without degenerating into a simple tool of ideological and political propaganda. Lee has written on the modernist poet Dai Wangshu, and his discussion of Chinese literary modernism is well informed and persuasive, different from the rigid separation of works that a

modernism-postmodernism dichotomy would lead us to believe. "What distinguished modernism in China from the other modern literary modes," the author observes, "was its ambivalence towards the modernising, industrialising, materialist road to national salvation or regeneration which constituted the dominant narrative of progress for most patriotic Chinese intellectuals and producers of culture; an anti-imperialist narrative which can so easily become confused with national chauvinism" (p. 72). Lee observes that while some poets like Ai Qing are patriotic and loyal to the Communist Party, many modern and modernist poets in China are deviating from the official ideology and literary nationalism. "There is in this kind of verse," he says, "an attempt to establish, against official poetic practice, which in this instance is an instrument of society's regnant authority, a type of aesthetic autonomy, although of a sort that still provides a critique of social life" (p. 82). For the author, Bei Dao, Cui Jian, and particularly Duo Duo represent the poetic force of such a deviating modernism, one that challenges some of the time-honored nationalist and official concepts and habits of thinking.

Cutting through the pretensions of different political claims, Lee sees nationalism or national chauvinism as the dominant ideology in much of modern Chinese history. This nationalism in the last few decades was anti-imperialist, but at the same time hierarchical in its Maoist conceptualization of Third World solidarity, in which China and its supreme leader Chairman Mao assumed the role of guides for the rest of the Third World in their "struggles of liberation." In the 1990s, the Maoist fervor for revolution was replaced by the fervor for commercialism and a market economy, but the ideology of nationalism persists. "Today the nationalist ideology which was imbricated with official Communist ideology, and constructed by the CCP, is discredited," says Lee, "but a seemingly new nationalist ideology is being constructed, this time on a market economy capitalist base. And yet it is an ideology informed by the same discourse of nationalism and patriotism that has dominated in China for a hundred years at least" (p. 32). It is this resolutely anti-nationalist stance that renders Lee's book truly radical not just in terms of a critique of the official state ideology in China, but also in terms of a critique of Western theoretical reflections on the Third World. Indeed, in the simplistic disavowal of anything "foreign" and "Western" by the Chinese authorities, and in the Western academic idealization of a non-Western Other, Lee sees a sort of concurrence of views between Chinese authorities and "the élite discourse of the cultural imperialism of the Western academy" (p. 17).

Not surprisingly, then, he takes issue with Fredric Jameson on the latter's notions of "national allegory" and "Third World literature," going much further than Jameson's other critics like Aijaz Ahmad. In Jameson's opposition of a corrupt First World and the utopian possibilities of the Third World, and especially in his anxiety to preserve "the Third World 'socialist' purity," Lee sees a theoreti-

cal stance that turns out to be politically conservative despite its underlying Western Marxist assumptions; "Jameson's concern is redolent of the conservative Chinese bureaucracy's paranoid fears of foreign 'spiritual pollution'," he claims. "While seeming to encourage China's emergent new literature, Jameson in fact valorises 'official' party-state-sponsored literary production" (p. 114). Lee does not mince his words in pointing out the ironic fact that Western radical theories and Chinese conservative political forces sometimes make strange bedfellows. He sneers at the fashionable gesture in Western academic circles of "mourning" the demise of socialism, "the standard litany of post-Communism, the death of Marxism, the end of the Soviet Union, the fall of the [Berlin] Wall," as exemplified by Derrida's elegiac *Spectres de Marx*. What such gestures indicate, he argues, is a denial of people's experience in political reality, for "these particular mourners could only regret the failure of externally imagined utopias, not the lived experience of Communist régimes" (p. 5).

The emphasis on reality and lived experience gives Lee's book a grounding different from the usual kind of theoretical speculations on China or the Third World, and also makes it different from traditional sinological studies of Chinese poetry. In his quarrel with Stephen Owen's dismissal of modern Chinese poetry as inauthentic and opposite to "some glorious past" of an imagined Tang China, Lee tries to show how modern Chinese poets write not in mere imitation of Western literary fashions, but in response to their own times and a specifically Chinese political reality. "Modernism in China has been a product not necessarily of seduction by a particular colonialist culture," he maintains, "but rather of an appropriation of political and aesthetic ideas understood, read, reused in the Chinese context in the light of prevailing historical conditions" (p. 78). Against Owen's charge of universal images and universal language without any specific national characteristics, Lee cites Bei Dao's lines in mourning of a friend executed during the Cultural Revolution: "Here I stand/ Replacing another, who has been murdered." And he challenges whether this is something Owen could possibly have experienced or written when he was of the same age as Bei Dao and his young friend (p. 99). Such advocacy of modern Chinese poetry as both a political intervention and a response to Chinese social reality should probably make Lee's book doubly controversial, because it is arguing on the one hand against the sinologist's idealization of a "pure" and "authentic" Chinese past as Owen would entertain in his negative review of Bei Dao's modern poetry, and on the other against the theorizing or romanticizing of China as the West's utopian Other as Jameson often does in his conceptual mapping of the postmodern world in what he calls the period of late capitalism.

Like other books dealing with current subjects that are constantly changing, Lee's book is likely to suffer from the unpredictable trajectories of its moving target. As alluded to earlier, the belief in the efficacy of poetry or the lyric would

probably sound quixotic under the current conditions in China, some four or five years after the book's first appearance. Nor does its voice sound convincing when Lee argues by quoting Péret that "A poet these days must be either a revolutionary or not [be] a poet" (p. 63). Indeed, the many quotations in this book tend to let the reader wonder whether these quoted passages, often written for a totally different situation in, say, France, would fit well in the Chinese situation under discussion. All in all, however, I think the book is worthy of the attention of students of modern Chinese literature and culture, as it should challenge some of the popular theoretical notions and stances that are too often taken for granted and thus seldom scrutinized in a critical fashion.

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